

A Huge Debt to 20th Century Modernism? António Lobo Antunes's Prose Style and his Models

1. *Questioning*

These lines were originally written by Conrad Aiken in a text called *William Faulkner*:

The famous remark made to Macaulay – “Young man, the more I consider the less can I conceive where you pick up that style” – might with advantage have been saved for Mr. Faulkner. For if one thing is more outstanding than another about Mr. Faulkner – some readers find it so outstanding, indeed, that they never get beyond it – it is the uncompromising and almost hypnotic zeal with which he insists upon having a style, and, especially of late, the very peculiar style which he insists upon having. Perhaps to that one should add that he insists when he remembers – he can write straightforwardly enough when he wants to; he does so often in the best of his short stories (and they are brilliant), often enough, too, in the novels. But that style is what he really wants to get back to; and get back to it he invariably does.

And what a style it is, to be sure! The exuberant and tropical luxuriance of sound which Jim Europe's Jazz Band use to exhale like a jungle of rank creepers and ferocious blooms taking shape before one's eyes – magnificently endlessly interwoven, glisteningly and ophidianly emotion, coil sliding over coil, and leaf and flower forever magically interchanging – was scarcely more bewildering, in its sheer inexhaustible fecundity, than Mr. Faulkner's style. Small wonder if even the most passionate of Mr. Faulkner's admirers – among whom the present writer honors himself by enlisting – must find, with each new novel, that the first fifty pages are always the hardest, that each time one must learn all over again how to read these strangely fluid and slippery and heavily mannered prose, and that one is even, like a kind of Laocoön, sometimes tempted to give it up (Aiken 1966: 46).

The Novel as Form and as such do not refer to ALA but to one of his supposed literary influences. When I read these lines, I could not, however, help but think of ALA, if only we changed the name of Mr. Faulkner to Mr. Lobo Antunes. Similarly, I read Faulkner's most famous work, *The Sound and the Fury*, trying to trace its influence over ALA's prose. As with the short lines above, I was fascinated by the compatibility of the two styles, mainly in the first two parts of the book (themselves very different in technique). These are, namely, the first chapter ('April Seventh 1928'), in which the narrator is the *idiot* Benji, and the second one ('June Second 1910'), narrated by his brother Quentin Compson, who has recently gone mad.

Many sources state that we should consider the modernist masters of English-speaking prose – such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and especially William Faulkner – as ALA's major literary models. Other sources compare the figure of ALA more explicitly to a Portuguese or a contemporary Faulkner, as in the following quote:

António Lobo Antunes, un des derniers grands représentants du monologue intérieur, est-il le Faulkner portugais? Bref aperçu d'une œuvre romanesque exigeante, hantée par le déclin, la culpabilité, la folie, la nostalgie de la gloire passée, et le pessimisme historique et philosophique (Delville 2010).

More generally, in reactions both from the public and from critics – in which ALA's work is linked to both twentieth-century modernism and experimentalism – it is not unusual to see ALA proclaimed as one of Portugal's (or Europe's!) greatest living writers:

Is Antonio Lobo Antunes Europe's greatest living writer? The question is far from absurd, and the answer might well be 'yes' (Oard 2012).

Who, then, is ALA? What has he written so far? And why do his readers insist on connecting him to the modernist tradition and proclaim his work as a monument of present-day European literature?

2. Introducing ALA

2.1 Biography and work

Since his first book (*Memória de Elefante*, 1979), ALA's literary work could be considered as a vast and vibrant fresco of the contemporary Portuguese social scene. Somehow, his impressive literary legacy (to this date comprising twenty-seven novels and five books of *crónicas* – or short stories – among minor publications) is the best image of Portuguese recent history that literature can offer. To some extent, it has proved to resist over time the influence of contemporary Portuguese aesthetics in a deeper way than the more canonical and internationally famous work of the Portuguese Nobel Laureate José Saramago.

In recent years, Portuguese critics and academics have therefore begun to work on the enormous task of reading and interpreting such a vast, dense and complex literary work. Maria Alzira Seixo, António Bettencourt and Filipe Cammaert are but the main names in Portuguese ALA criticism. Extending this recognition to the publishing field, European publishers have since the early years published ALA outside of his homeland. Some of his best and most renowned novels have been translated in the most important European countries by some of the most powerful publishers (Debolsillo/Mondadori and Siruela in Spain, Einaudi and – later – Feltrinelli in Italy, Fischer Verlag and Luchterhand in Germany, Christian Bourgois in France). This is why ALA has earned such a prominent place among contemporary Portuguese writers, both at home and abroad.

Born into a bourgeois family from the Lisbon area of Benfica, ALA studied medicine at Lisbon University. Soon after graduation he was sent to war in Angola by the *Estado Novo* regime. In Angola the Portuguese Empire was fighting its final and fatal battle against the historically inevitable future independence of African colonies. He served as a doctor in the front line for a few years before being discharged and sent back to Lisbon. Once back home, ALA started working as psychiatrist in the public hospital Miguel Bombarda in Lisbon. These two initial and seminal events in ALA's early adulthood (the war in Angola and public mental health service) led him to writing, possibly in order to digest and exorcize the 'knowledge of Hell' he had built through those experiences. As a matter of fact, his first novels focus explicitly on these matters. (*Memória de Elefante*, his very first novel, appears to be autobiographical at the highest level, being the description of a deep depression of a psychiatrist living in Lisbon, who has to deal with his own failures and a divorce; *Os Cus de Judas*, his second novel, can be considered as an account of the front line horrors in the Colonial War; *Conhecimento do Inferno*, his third novel, attacks and ridicules the contemporary Portuguese mental health system).

The peculiarities of ALA's writing as well as his main themes justify an international interest, although he can well be considered the most Portuguese, and sometimes the most Lisboner, of his peers.

2.2 Themes

In ALA's work the reader may have the feeling that the author is always writing and cyclically rewriting the same novel, even when the setting and themes are clearly different.¹ In a broader

1. ALA himself has observed: 'pelo menos para mim, cada livro serve para corrigir o anterior. No fundo, o que tenho escrito, livro a livro, é uma *Memória de*

sense, ALA is somehow exorcizing his own ghosts. This was a process begun on the the first line of the first page of his first novel, and it has continued ever since, in a lifetime spent writing and rewriting about and against the same phantoms. ALA's 'ghosts' first appear on the Angolan front line and continue to haunt him back home, when a new set and type of devils (those deriving from his psychiatric activity) arouse him to both revolt and depression. His skills of social observation and description, quite apparent since his first novel, as well as the sarcastic and brutal opening of *Os Cus de Judas*, sharpen with time until he abandons explicitly autobiographical features altogether, beginning instead to portray the contradictions, idiosyncrasies and manias of the Portuguese bourgeoisie.

In *Fado Alexandrino* the Colonial War strikes back, and indeed ALA presents a ferocious portrait of the failed patriotic project. From a non-Portuguese point of view, however, *As Naus* (1988) is probably the most readable and self-contained of ALA's novels. The experimental features are not exaggerated yet, while the novel explicitly addresses the Portuguese imperial project. In this absolute masterpiece, various Portuguese white settlers are forced to *return* to Portugal by the upcoming independence of African colonies (1974/1975), and the narrator accompanies them through their return. The novel reveals that each one of them carries the name of a famous Portuguese admiral from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, plus that of the national bard Luís Vaz de Camões. Every *retornado* acquires then some of the characteristics of his homonymous historical figure, in a sarcastic nonsense that destroys the nation's myths in just a few hundred pages. There is no possible salvation for a 'dreamed Empire' that ended tragically and for good.

From this period on, in a set of ponderous novels, ALA's prose continues to dissect and analyse Portuguese society. The

elefante sucessivamente corrigida' (Arnaut 2008: 305–23).

scenario always runs along more or less the same lines; there is the sense of failed dreams and failed lives in a failed society.

The reasons for ALA's unexpected success in Portugal are now quite evident. In a country in which many of the young sons of the bourgeoisie fled to Central Europe or North America in order to avoid being enlisted for the colonial war, in a country which had the longest lasting fascist dictatorship of the twentieth century that forced the country into a false and pernicious imperial myth, we can say that ALA's ghosts were the ghosts of a good slice of the nation. The themes mentioned above could not, therefore, stay in the background for long. In this regard, ALA can be seen as the national bard of the end of Portugal as we have known it, as the negative image of a Portuguese Whitman singing about what's been left behind after the big defeat.

From a stylistic perspective, ALA's prose is of the highest interest to the literary critic. Never explicit, never classical nor canonical, ALA develops a personal and distinctive style through more than three decades of literary life. This style towers over contemporary Portuguese and European prose. It is very easy to postulate the influence of the international masters of twentieth-century experimental prose and the stream of consciousness: there is abundant evidence of the influence of Faulkner, Joyce and Woolf on such a refined prose technique. ALA, however, goes further, testing and trying until he reaches a strange balance in which his prose can no longer be thought as an experimental one – a mode that is made to demonstrate its own possibility against the tradition – but instead becomes something like a new canonical style for a newly possible literary era. Every one of ALA's reader knows only too well that the apparent nonsense and confusion that he or she is faced with in the first pages of a new novel becomes gradually, somehow magically and apparently inexplicably, a deep and clear narrative scenario in which not only facts, obliquely sometimes, are

related, but much more. It is as if the reader were put in direct contact with some of the character's feelings and thoughts, in a sort of psychological experience in which he reaches deeply into the character's personality.

2.3 Local and Universal

Given that ALA's books are full of social, geographical, historical and topographical references, never explicit to the foreigner but always carrying a heavy charge of meaning, we could say that ALA is also the great singer of Portugal's and Lisbon's contemporaneity 'on the street level'. His description often enters the houses and apartments of Portuguese families: doctors, old ladies, the last survivors of Alentejo's landowner dynasties. Through objects and furniture, he continually portrays and catalogues the lives and dreams of their owners.

Why, then, translate ALA? Why, then, reading his novels outside Portugal? Is there another reason besides the possible historical interest of his detailed descriptions of the Atlantic country?

It is possible that it was due to his 'thematic' characteristics that many of the foreign publishers cited above decided to publish ALA in their countries, but there is certainly more to it than that. ALA's peculiar and successful experimentalism, his deconstructing and reconstructing of modern prose in Portugal, has succeeded in an enterprise that is unique in the European continent. It showed the way in which certain experimental models of the twentieth century are not just oddities, doomed to be forever buried in the manuals of the history of literature. Instead, they might be able to provide a different way of producing a new type of literary prose.

The success of ALA's writings at home have consecrated his position as a writer who has modified the contemporary can-

on of Portuguese prose, freeing and giving air to experimental tendencies in younger writers who might otherwise have been pressured to adopt more traditional models. In this sense, ALA's example – the most locally-rooted European Writer of the western-most European nation – could be considered also a universal example of absolute genius. Readable, aesthetically enjoyable and in some ways reproducible in other literary spaces, his novels might act as a starting point or a magnificent example for other literatures. Accordingly, ALA's prose style – a dialogue between the street corners of Lisbon, the African front line of forty years ago and the history of World Literature – represents a landmark that concerns the whole of the European and Western literary tradition. It constitutes a neo-canonical proposal that would be too ingenuous to dismiss or, even worse, to ignore.

3. ALA's style(s) and techniques

O que os estrangeiros dizem que eu trago de novo para a literatura não é mais do que a adaptação à literatura de técnicas da psicoterapia: as pessoas iluminarem-se umas às outras e a concomitância do passado, do presente e do futuro (ALA 2008: 237).²

Mirroring the rich body of criticism concerning the concomitant emergence of psychoanalytic and modernist prose in the first decades of the twentieth century, some research has been done into the convergence of psychotherapy techniques in ALA's prose style (for example a paper from 2013 by André Sá), which makes sense given that the author has extensive knowledge of such techniques, acquired in his professional career as a psychiatrist. Perhaps working from the basis of this knowledge,

2. 'What foreigners are saying is the new thing I'm bringing to literature is nothing more than the adaptation to literature of techniques from psychotherapy: people illuminating each other, and the concomitance of past, present and future'. Please acknowledge the translator.

ALA knows perfectly well that his prose is not 'normal' and that his novels are not 'novels'. At a certain point he felt the need to explain to his readers 'how he should be read':

Sempre que alguém afirma ter lido um livro meu fico decepcionado com o erro. É que os meus livros não são para serem lidos no sentido em que usualmente se chama ler: a única forma parece-me de abordar os romances que escrevo é apanhá-los do mesmo modo que se apanha uma doença.

[...]

Aquilo a que por comodidade chamei romances, como poderia ter chamado poemas, visões, o que se quiser, apenas se entenderão se os tomarem por outra coisa. A pessoa tem de renunciar à sua própria chave, aquela que todos temos para abrir a vida, a nossa e a alheia e utilizar a chave que o texto lhe oferece. De outra maneira torna-se incompreensível, dado que as palavras são apenas signos de sentimentos íntimos, e as personagens, situações e intriga os pretextos de superfície que utilizo para conduzir ao fundo avesso da alma. A verdadeira aventura que proponho é aquela que o narrador e o leitor fazem em conjunto ao negrume do inconsciente, à raiz da natureza humana. Quem não entender isto aperceber-se-á apenas dos aspectos mais parcelares e menos importantes dos livros: o país, a rela homem-mulher, o problema da identidade e da procura dela, África e a brutalidade da exploração colonial, etc., temas se calhar muito importantes do ponto de vista político, ou social, ou antropológico, mas que nada têm a ver com o meu trabalho (ALA 2002).³

3. 'Every time someone says they have read a book of mine I am very disappointed by the mistake. The thing is my books are not to be read, in the way we usually mean reading: the only way to approach the novels I write is, as it seems to me, to catch them, like you catch a disease. [...] That which, out of convenience, I called novels, as I could have called them poems, visions, or whatever, will only be understood if taken as something else. One has to forego one's own key, the one we all have, with which to open up life, ours and others', and just use the key that the text provides. Otherwise, it will be incomprehensible, since words are just signs of intimate feelings, and characters, situations and plot are but the superficial pretexts I use to lead to the deep background of the soul. The true adventure I am setting forth is the one narrator and reader will undertake together, towards the darkness of the unconscious, the very roots of human nature. Who doesn't understand this will only be aware of the most partial and less important elements of the books: the country, the man-woman relationship, the issue of identity and the search for it, Africa and the brutality of colonial

Here ALA states beyond any doubt that what matters in his work is not the substance but the form; it is not the story (or History) to be narrated but the relationship his novels aim to establish with their reader. How does ALA do that? What do these novels look like? In the first novels, the style is not canonical and can be exemplified by these paragraphs, taken from the beginning of the 1988 novel *As Naus*:

No dia do embarque, a seguir a uma travessa de vivendas de condessas dementes, de lojas de passarinhos alucinados e de bares de turistas onde os ingleses procediam à transfusão de gin matinal, o táxi deixou-nos junto ao Tejo numa orla de areia chamada Belém consoante se lia no apeadeiro de comboios próximo com uma balança de uma banda e um urinol da outra, e ele avistou centenas de pessoas e de pares de bois que transportavam blocos de pedra para uma construção enorme dirigidos por escudeiros de saia de escarlata indiferentes aos carros de praça, às camionetas de americanas divorciadas e de padres espanhóis, e aos japoneses míopes que fotografavam tudo, conversando numa língua bicuda de samurais. Então poisámos a bagagem no terreiro, por cima dos agapantos que as mangueiras mecânicas aspergiam em impulsos circulares, perto dos operários que trabalhavam nos esgotos da alameda que conduzia ao estádio de futebol e aos prédios altos do Restelo, de tal modo que os tratores dos cabo-verdianos se cruzavam com carroças de túmulos de infantas e de pilhas de arabescos de altares. Passando por uma placa que designava o edifício incompleto e que dizia Jerónimos esbarrámos com a Torre ao fundo, a meio do rio, cercada de petroleiros iraquianos, defendendo a pátria das invasões castelhanas, e mais próximo, nas ondas frissadas da margem, a aguardar os colonos, presa aos limos da água por raízes de ferro, com almirantes de punhos de renda apoiados na amurada do convés e grumetes encarrapitados nos mastros aparelhando as velas para o desamparo do mar que cheirava a pesadelo e a gardénia, achámos à espera, entre barcos a remos e uma agitação de canoas, a nau das descobertas (ALA 1988: 9-10).

A set of constant features of this period's style can be listed as follows:

exploitation, etc..., themes that are maybe very important from a political, social, or anthropological point of view, but have nothing to do with my work'.

— Typographically still traditional, full punctuation and no interrupted sentences;

— Long paragraphs forced in a traditional block, few parentheses, few dashes;

— The narrative rhythm is continually interrupted: sudden and continuous changes in narrative plan, setting, topic, time.

— Sudden change of grammar subject especially swinging between the 1st and the 3rd person, especially in those grammar tenses in which the two forms are identical (i. e. *Imperfeito do indicativo*; *Presente* or *Imperfeito do Conjuntivo*; *Condicional*).

— Traditional narrative chain interrupted by sudden and apparently unrelated dialogues or dialogue fragments.

Literary critics almost unanimously agree in identifying at least three (but many say more) cycles of novels within the complete body of ALA's work (Prado Telles 221). Concerning style and technique therefore, we can consider that after the end of the Eighties, ALA somehow nurtured a 'new' stylistic balance. Therein the usual experimental features of the earlier prose are brought to an extreme, as we can see from these short extracts from the 2006 novel *Boa Tarde às Coisas aqui em Baixo* (but I could have chosen almost any of ALA's novels from the last twenty years):

Não sei se ela disse

— Esta era a casa

ou

(se calhar)

— Há vinte anos nós

ou

(pode ser, não estou certo)

— Morei aqui

ou então não disse nada, limitou-se a subir da Muxima ao meu lado, talvez um pouco à minha frente.

[...] (ALA 2006: 15)

a necessidade de chegar a Angola para um trabalhinho simples

Miguéis

amigo Miguéis

uma questão de rotina, três ou quatro dias no máximo a fim de limpar os restos que um colega seu um rapaz sem experiência, bom rapaz mas sem experiência foi deixado por África e o primeiro resto a limpar é ele mesmo numa fazenda de girassol e algodão a cinquenta ou sessenta quilômetros de Luanda, ele mesmo, uns documentozinhos que poderiam maçar-nos e os diamantes é claro que não recebemos Ainda. (ALA 2006: 215)

As before, a short list of recurrent features can be easily traced:

— Traditional punctuation and text composition are broken: the narrative stream is continually interrupted by: dialogues or parts of, parentheses, dashes, blank lines, sudden paragraph shifts (in the middle of a sentence and/or in the middle of a word).

— Total disorientation.

To come back to Aiken's opinion on Faulkner, it is not useless to quote some lines of that reader's response to Faulkner's most extreme experimentalism, such as these:

It is annoying, at the end of a sentence, to find that one does not know in the least what was the subject of the verb that dangles *in vacuo* – it is distracting to have to go back and sort out the meaning, track down the structure from close to close, then only to find that after all it doesn't much matter, and that the obscurity was perhaps neither subtle nor important. And to the extent that one *is* annoyed and distracted, and *does* thus go back and work it out, it may be at once added that Mr. Faulkner has defeated his own ends. One has had, of course, to emerge from the stream, and to step away from it, in order properly to see it; and as Mr. Faulkner works precisely by a process of *immersion*, of hypnotizing his reader into *remaining immersed* in his dream, this occasional blunder produces irritation and failure (Aiken 1966: 48).

4. ALA's sources and Modernism

Yesterday I was reading Joyce's *Ulysses*, and I consider this novel fantastic as regards its verbal richness, but, at the same time, I was a little annoyed because I didn't understand what justified all that extraordinary verbal lushness. Easy pirouettes, the fantastic showcase of a powerful skill for verbal inventiveness, it reflects a certain sense of futility because it does not help the plot in terms of narrative effectiveness. On the one hand, it is important to dominate language, words, but for me that is not enough because, in the end, you would see that it isn't the most important thing. The important thing is for the book to be made by itself, that it can have an existence of its own, and that its value can be measured by itself, and not because someone has done it. With Joyce, we are always feeling his skill, his learning as a writer is an imposition on us and we are all the time observing that it is him, Joyce himself, who is behind everything (Ceia 2006).

In these lines, ALA very much distances himself from the Joycean model. Still, if he were not the Portuguese Faulkner, he could be the Portuguese Joyce, meaning that the importance of his work is similar in degree to the importance of Joyce's work in English-speaking literature. The remark that in Joyce 'we are always feeling his skill' is important to the extent that ALA is an author who almost never quotes other authors or literary works, in a possible attempt to be not only un-erudite but anti-erudite. We could also add that if the early and mature modernist authors wrote also in order to affirm a new technique, odd at the time, ALA does not have the same problem, precisely thanks to authors like Joyce who established new possibilities for the literary techniques of the future.

If not Joyce, then, who are ALA's actual models, by his own admission and/or his critics'? Is William Faulkner among them? Has he read him?

O próprio autor mostra, em muitas de suas entrevistas, as fontes das quais se alimenta. Além dos sempre lembrados Tolstoi, Flaubert, Proust, Conrad e Tchekhov, Lobo Antunes dá destaque aos autores sul-americanos, em especial Júlio Cortázar, Juan Rulfo, Ernesto Sábato

e Vargas Llosa. Sobre os norte-americanos, sempre afirma invejar a capacidade de concisão de Hemingway e a qualidade dos romances de William Faulkner de se reinventarem a cada leitura, tal como a poesia. Sobre *O som e a fúria* diz tê-lo visitado já mais de trinta vezes. Outra obra que declara tê-lo acompanhado ao longo de sua vida é *Viagem ao fim da noite*, do francês Louis-Ferdinand Céline; do qual parece ter cultivado o estilo da linguagem despuddorada e contundente. Sobre os autores portugueses, reconhece a singularidade e a importância de Agustina Bessa-Luís e lembra sempre de ressaltar a qualidade das obras de Augusto Abelaira, Almeida Faria, Lídia Jorge, João de Melo e, com especial predileção, as de seu grande amigo José Cardoso Pires (Prado Telles 2009: 220).⁴

It is common knowledge that in the first decades of the twentieth century, literary experimentalism found its way through the canon with the illustrious example of the great masters of the genre, with impressive prose works pivoted on what has been labelled as the stream of consciousness technique, combined with a general narrative and structural fragmentation of the narrative and with temporal unevenness. The usual names come to mind, such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and, at its most extreme, *Finnegans Wake* (1939). On the other side of the Atlantic, in the same linguistic dominion, William Faulkner is mentioned as the American master of the genre, especially for *The Sound and the*

4. 'The author himself reveals, in many of his interviews, the sources on which he feeds. Apart from the always remembered Tolstoy, Flaubert, Proust, Conrad and Chekhov, Lobo Antunes gives prominence to the south American authors, particularly Julio Cortázar, Juan Rulfo, Ernesto Sábato and Vargas Llosa. About north-Americans, he always declares to envy Hemingway's capacity to be concise, and the ability William Faulkner's novels have of being reinvented by each new reading, like poetry does. About *The Sound and the Fury*, he stated to have visited it more than thirty times. Another work he says has accompanied him throughout his life is *Journey to the End of the Night* by the French Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose impudent and blunt language style he seems to have cultivated. Among the Portuguese authors, he recognizes the singularity and importance of Agustina Bessa-Luís and always remembers to underscore the quality of the works of Augusto Abelaira, Almeida Faria, Lídia Jorge, João de Melo and, with a particular fondness, the ones by his great friend José Cardoso Pires'.

Fury (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Everywhere else on the European continent, linguistic and structural experimentalism in prose triumphed in similar formulae, as in Arthur Schnitzler's prose in the German-speaking area and Louis Ferdinand Céline in the French-speaking one (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*, 1932 and *Mort à crédit*, 1936).

1939 is considered the year in which this genre reached its climax, with the publication of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. As this mode of literary experimentalism was reaching its climax there came, at the same time, the beginning of its decline (Delville 2010). It is a fact that the post-war years would see the demise of this kind of 'experimental modernism', making room for more traditional forms or to a *mélange* of various techniques and styles. The great masterpieces of 'experimental modernism' have however been solidly inscribed into the Western literary canon and have been somehow digested by our tradition.

On the other hand, the contemporary European prose tradition has dropped almost any trace of the heritage of this kind of experimentalism.

Among ALA's literary sources, as we have seen above, some Portuguese authors have consistently and repeatedly been cited, even by the author himself. His contemporaries José Cardoso Pires, Almeida Faria and Lídia Jorge are the main names quoted. In fact, the wave of neorealism that swept Portugal during the last decades of the *Estado Novo* regime – in the plastic arts, in cinema and in literature – gave way to important shifts. On the one hand, there was a late surrealist flourishing.⁵ On the other hand, there was a wave of new linguistic and structural experimentalism built on the influence of the French *nouveau roman*, which grew to be a strong influence in the early democratic period. José Cardoso Pires (1925–1988), considered unanimously as one of the great masters of twentieth-century Portuguese prose,

5. The core of Cesariny's work was published between the 1950s and the 1970s.

was a personal friend of ALA's until his death and presents us with one of the most refined and dense prose models in Portuguese. Almeida Faria's (b. 1942) prose is definitely influenced by French *nouveau roman* models, in an aesthetic built on strong experimentalism, narrative fragmentation, apparent nonsense, lack of logical links and a peculiar use of punctuation.⁶ Lília Jorge (b. 1946), one of the greatest contemporary Portuguese writers, published her first novels during the 1980s, in which traditional prose is abandoned in favour of a more fragmented and synoptic technique.⁷ More or less in the same years, there was another author active in Portuguese prose that is less quoted in general and seems not to be mentioned by ALA as a literary source. Nuno Bragança (1929–1985) could all the same be a possible model for a certain experimentalism in literature. His *A Noite e o Riso* (1969) and the rest of his short literary legacy are a masterful example of experimentalism in Portuguese prose.⁸

As it is, however, ALA himself points out the special influence exerted by William Faulkner and Louis Ferdinand Céline, as we can see here:

O som e a fúria possui a qualidade de ser um romance que, tal como a grande poesia, se relê no maravilhoso da descoberta: a todo o passo damos com pormenores que nos haviam passado despercebidos, em cada página nos emocionamos. Já visitei este livro mais de 30 vezes, e continuarei decerto a fazê-lo com o mesmo deslumbramento e o mesmo entusiasmo (Faulkner 1994).⁹

6. Faria's most celebrated novels have been published between the early 60s and the early 80s: *Rumor Branco* (1962), and the 'Tetralogia Lusitana': *A Paixão* (1965), *Cortes* (1978), *Lusitânia* (1980) and *Cavaleiro Andante* (1983).

7. *O Dia dos Prodígios* (1980), *O Cais das Merendas* (1982), *Notícia da Cidade Silvestre* (1984), *A Costa dos Murmúrios* (1988).

8. *Directa* (1977), *Square Tolstoi* (1981), *Estação* (1984), *Do Fim do Mundo* (1990).

9. '*The Sound and the Fury* has the characteristic of being a novel which, like great poetry, can be re-read with the wonder of rediscovery: with every step, we stumble into details that had gone unnoticed, we feel moved by every page. I have visited this book more than 30 times, and I will surely continue to do it with the same bedazzlement and enthusiasm'.

Em entrevista concedida a Baptista-Bastos, Lobo Antunes declarou ter lido mais de vinte vezes esta obra de Céline¹⁰ (cf. “Escrever não me dá prazer”. *Jornal de Letras, Artes e Ideias*, 19/11/1985, 3-5. In Arnaut 2008: 75), (Prado Telles 2009: 220).

Certa vez, perguntado sobre a constante presença do ódio em seus romances, principalmente em *Auto dos danados*, Lobo Antunes justificou-se dizendo que seus romances ‘parecem filhos de Faulkner’¹¹ (Entrevista a Clara Ferreira Alves, op. cit., 31-33. In Arnaut 2008: 91), (Prado Telles 2009: 233).

Experimentalism in prose was then not only possible in post-revolutionary Portugal; it somehow became the leading possibility for a prose that was striving to reinvent itself after long years dominated by the neorealist tendency. This occurred at a moment when the nation itself was trying to overcome the *Estado Novo* years and to reinvent itself as a country in democracy, lacking and therefore seeking a new auto-image after the chaos that followed the Carnation Revolution. What is more striking, however, is that ALA’s prose as a ‘fruit’ of late experimental modernism has survived the era in which it was first formulated. At the same time, this kind of non-traditional, strongly experimental, and indeed ever-increasingly experimental model has become central to the contemporary Portuguese canon more than three decades after the publication of ALA’s first novel in 1979.

Conclusions: What is ALA doing? Is it (neo)modernist?

A certa altura, a entrevistadora perguntou: “E você, o que quer contar? Aonde quer chegar?”. Lobo Antunes, por sua vez, não se furtou

10. ‘In an interview given to Baptista-Bastos, Lobo Antunes declared he has read this work by Céline more than twenty times’.

11. ‘Once, when asked about the constant presence of hatred in his novels, and mostly in *Auto dos Danados* [*Act of the Damned*], Lobo Antunes has justified himself by saying that his novels “seem to be children of Faulkner’s”.

às perguntas, assumindo a via da falsa modéstia, e respondeu, também diretamente: “O que pretendo é transformar a arte do romance, a história é o menos importante, é um veículo de que me sirvo, o importante é transformar essa arte, e há mil maneiras de fazê-lo, mas cada um tem de encontrar a sua” (Prado Telles 2009: 219).¹²

How should we, then, evaluate ALA’s work globally and its styles over the decades within the framework of Portuguese and European contemporary prose? How should we position it in the European literary landscape against the example of the modernist tradition? And all this almost a century after the publication of the main modernist masterpieces.

As we have seen before, ALA’s style and techniques vary along the years and the different novels – depending also on the matter and form of every single one. However, we have also seen that many readers and critics, along with the author himself, consider the novels to be somehow the constant and continuous rewriting of the same great novel, of a single style manifesto that informs us of their creator’s conscious intentions when it comes to the art of literary prose. In general, we need to underline that there is no ALA novel that can be ascribed to any form of traditional prose or narrative, whatever the precise meaning of this should be. Experimentalism, narrative fragmentation and linguistic structure are recurrent, even if used in different ways throughout the various novels. The extensive use of the stream of consciousness technique and of the ‘broken dialogues’, without informing the reader of the identity of the narrative subject, is constant in ALA’s work.

We can say for sure that ALA’s position in Portugal has no parallel with any other European author in his country and/or

12. ‘At a certain point, the interviewer asked: “How about you, what do you want to tell? Where do you want to go?”. Lobo Antunes did not avoid the questions, choosing the path of false modesty, and answered, also in a direct manner: “What I intend to do is to transform the art of the novel, the plot is the least important thing, it is a vehicle I use, the important thing is to transform that art, and there are thousands of ways to do it, but each one must find their own”’.

in the European tradition. ALA's novels have proven to be best sellers in Portugal and have entered what can be considered the 'big circle' of European authors, as we have seen, with many translations in the main European countries published by the biggest and most prestigious publishing houses. ALA's influence over the course of Portuguese aesthetics in prose is also conspicuous, given that many younger authors have grown up working alongside or against his pervasive presence and model.

This position and the vastness of his still growing body of literary work gives ALA the status of the only 'experimentalist' author in Europe who has moved to occupy what we can consider the centre of the contemporary literary canon. Before that, the only example of this happening was the case of James Joyce. As has been confirmed over the decades, this was a highly experimentalist author in prose who came to occupy the centre of the literary canon for the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, the great masters of modernist prose still have the taste of avant-garde experimentalism: James Joyce's *Ulysses*, considered the masterpiece of English-language prose in the twentieth century, even if it is great and central, is just one novel. After that, Joyce consolidated his legacy with *Finnegans Wake*, a novel that is extreme – too extreme – to be the leading or seminal work of a new aesthetics for the decades to come.

Faulkner's work too, read and criticised as it still rightly is, is but *one* of the possibilities that American contemporary prose exhibited; we cannot say that Faulknerian tendencies are central to American prose in the decades that followed his death. However, the vast (and we're still counting) body of ALA's work announces itself as a huge moment in contemporary Portuguese (and Lusophone) prose, capable of modifying (and having already modified) the course of Portuguese-speaking prose aesthetics for decades to come.

ALA's prose technique over the decades can be interpreted as the proposal of a neo-canonical prose for the Portuguese language, or is it for the European novel in the twenty-first century?

Having reached a balance with an experimentalism that ceases to be such, it reaches the high standard and the readable balance of a new prose model that is valid for everyone. Far from avant-gardist temptations or from the exaggerations associated with the initiators of a new technique, it changes in a revolutionary way the mainstream aesthetics and reading habits. The flame lit up by the modernist masters – especially in English – during the first half of the twentieth century seems to have flourished on the shores of the Atlantic in the Iberian Peninsula, casting its light on Europe.

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